

# Social Studies

LBM dealers historically have been shy about being early adopters of technology. But they have good reason to invest time and money learning about—and using—social media. By Pat Curry

Steve Linsky is as far from the stereotype of social media rock star as you can get. At 68 and semi-retired, he's from an era in which the hot new technology was color television. But as StevePROForce on Twitter, Linsky has nearly 600 followers who know that the social media director at National Lumber in Mansfield, Mass., is a ready source of information about whatever is happening in the building materials industry. When news breaks in the business, he's often one of the first people nationally to post about it.

"I can't go to a trade meeting anywhere where someone doesn't come over and say, 'Oh, you're StevePROForce!'" Linsky says. "I've met people all over the country. They know who I am; they know who National Lumber is."

That's nice for Linsky, but does it make sense for the company to pay for it? Linsky says his boss has asked him, "Why are we doing this? I pay you a lot of money. You're playing all day on Facebook."

It's a question any dealer is likely to spend time

pondering. What exactly is the return on investment for "playing all day on Facebook"?

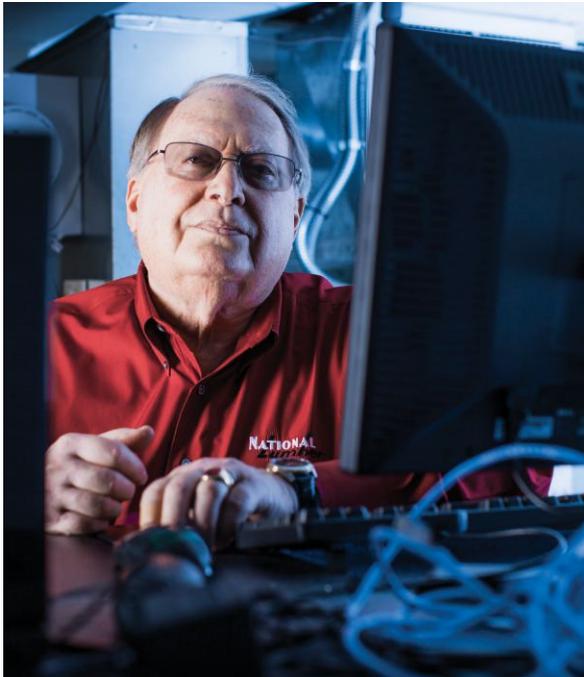
"That's not the best question to be asking," says Helene Gold, director of education for the Northeastern Retail Lumber Association. "I talk about ambient awareness. I encourage our dealers to think of it like this: On Saturdays, you have balloons and hot dogs in your parking lot. A contractor is driving by and stops for a hot dog. A year later, he thinks about the guy who gives him free hot dogs. He has had positive experiences with your company that don't necessarily have to do with buying and selling. It's not measurable, but it is valuable."

"Social media is the same way," Gold argues. "You're creating ambient awareness. It's probably not quantifiably measurable, but it's foolish not to be there."

It's a good idea to be anywhere that puts a dealer in front of his customers—and increasingly, building professionals are hanging out online. In a 2011 survey by Hanley Wood, ProSALES' corporate parent, about 50%



A Pro Who Packs a Force: Steve Linsky of National Lumber gives advice and news tips to nearly 600 followers via Twitter. He's known by his Twitter name: StevePROForce. Linsky also manages National Lumber's Facebook page, which has garnered more than 400 "Likes," and its LinkedIn site, with nearly 250 followers.



**Making a Connection:** Steve Linsky, social media director at National Lumber, believes the ideal candidate for leading a company's efforts on sites like Twitter or Facebook is an executive who loves construction supply and can write with enthusiasm.

of builders, remodelers, and architects reported they use social media. The top three uses cited were to communicate with peers, research products, and research vendors.

Want to reach those customers with social media? Here are some tips.

**Make It Personal** The first step, Gold says, is to identify who in the company will be responsible for posting messages, responding to queries, and generally managing its Facebook page. Gold strongly suggests it be a person who is already engaged in social media, working under the supervision of someone responsible for marketing.

Linsky says the ideal person is the president, operations manager, or sales manager—as long as that person loves the business and can write with enthusiasm. Bruce Abel, president and CEO of Don Abel Building Supply in Juneau, Alaska, has taken that approach.

“Perhaps I am a little paranoid about what gets posted, but until I am

comfortable and in the habit of looking at the page every day, I don't want to pass responsibility for the Don Abel page to someone else,” Abel says. “I also don't know that another member of my staff would place the same importance on maintaining it that I do.”

Abel says his goal for the Facebook page is to create and cultivate relationships, not to sell products.

“We are simply trying to get people interested in us as a company and understanding how we make our community a better place as a business and neighbors,” he says. “Honestly, I think our Facebook page will fall flat and fail if we attempted to use it as a sales tool because I don't think that is what Facebook users want in that arena.”

That's a smart strategy, says Andrew Davis, chief strategy officer for Boston-based digital marketing agency Tippingpoint Labs. He tells business owners to imagine what would happen if you went to a networking event and all you did was tell people, “We have 50% off today. Bring four friends and you'll get a free piece of lumber!”

“You would be sitting at a table by yourself,” Davis says. “If you said, ‘I found a great article,’ or ‘I have a friend who can help you with that project,’ you'll draw people. Having a retail operation allows you to educate people. If you tweeted a contractor tip of the day, contractors would start following you.”

He tells his customers to follow a 4-1-1 rule: Push out four pieces of relevant content every week, or even every day. One of those should be original and one can be promotional. The other two could be passing along an interesting article or information on a new product or regulation.

**Build Relationships** Ryan Mulkeen, director of marketing at Kuiken Brothers in Fair Lawn, N.J.,

launched the company's social media effort in earnest this year as the company began celebrating its 100th anniversary.

“We knew we had a lot to talk about,” he says. “We wanted to make sure we utilized the most cost-effective way to connect with people. On Facebook, we can post some photos behind the fences—what we have to offer. We can send a different message on Facebook than on our website or e-newsletter.”

Mulkeen hired a public relations firm to kick-start the process and then brought the effort in-house. For the first quarter of the year, he focused on decking; in the summer, the conversation will be more about lumber and framing.

“At very least, we'll have something fresh every other day,” he says. “If we have events or demo days, we'll hop on and feature those products.” It's a way for Kuiken Brothers to stay in front of desired customers, including architects, interior designers, and “the periodic homeowner who might roll in. You want them to come on board.”

Various manufacturers also follow Kuiken Brothers online; Mulkeen says it's a nice way to build that relationship. “We show them we're trying to promote their products and see what the end users are interested in. If we see that Trex is focusing on a new color and they're pushing that on a national level, we need to find a way to tell that story through our story so it becomes relevant to the local person.”

It's also been a helpful tool to promote the company's KB Classical Molding line, which was picked up by “This Old House” as one of its 100 best products of 2011. That exposure brought in catalog requests from as far away as Alaska.

“We want to create the perception that we're not just a little place in New Jersey,” Mulkeen says. “We've had a lot of national exposure—we are trying to keep ourselves on top of our A game. Our core is always going to be here in New Jersey and New York, but you never know what opportunities might arise.”

**National Lumber is on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn for the same reason that it hosts training sessions for remodelers: To help its customers grow their businesses.**

For an industry as product-driven as building materials, a social media site that's all about photos theoretically would make a lot of sense. Meet Pinterest.com, a site where users can create photo albums of images of literally anything. In the last several months, the site has experienced phenomenal growth. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article earlier this year, the number of unique visits to the site jumped from 4.9 million in November 2011 to more than 11 million in January,

## What To Make of Pinterest?

The hottest product in social media could prove useful to dealers.

when visitors spent an average of nearly 100 minutes on the site.

How is this different from *Houzz.com*, the website favored by remodelers and interior designers? While Houzz.com features finished projects, the site allows only designers to post. Pinterest lets anyone create a scrapbook of individual elements of a project and pull together their ideas in one place. Pinterest users have a pin icon in their browser bar. Anytime they see something on a website that they like, they can "pin" it to their scrapbook on Pinterest.

"It's so visual," says Mark Johnson, a residential architect who is active in social media. "Architects have always done sample boards for our clients with colors and finishes. Pinterest is a virtual sample board."

While many social media experts say the site is geared to consumers rather than B2B, it could work for some pros as well. Johnson says interior designers are "all over Pinterest," not only as a showcase for their work but also as a way to show clients the colors and finishes they are considering. A remodeler or designer with a customer involved in a renovation can have the customer create an album such as "Ideas for my new kitchen" and "pin" photos to it of everything from flooring to lighting.

A dealer could post images of new products or finished projects that used the dealers' products. Those could be shared with their pro customers; the pinned photo includes the URL, which will take customers directly to the dealer's website.

"Once you put a product image there with a little description and a link, it can be pinned by anybody," Johnson notes. "The reach goes on and on. ... For building product manufacturers, the challenge is how to get someone to go to the website. This way, you have consumers and designers curating for you."

Manufacturers such as Formica and Boral USA see Pinterest as a good fit for their social media outreach to professionals and consumers alike. "It's a natural for the industry," says Jamie Latta,

who handles social media for Boral USA. "It's a great way to drive people like architects to the website. HGTV is using it extensively."

Bill Roush, director of communications for Formica, says the company jumped in to Pinterest more or less as an experiment.

"Our first goal was to pin images of our products," he says. "Laminate is one of the most affordable and prevalent surfacing materials on the market, and many people haven't been exposed to today's laminate, which we've really re-invented in the last few years. For that reason, great photography is a critical part of Formica's marketing strategy, and, frankly, Pinterest is a great venue and rapidly growing community."

The images that get repinned most often are completed projects, Johnson says. "When I'm adding one of those, I'm very diligent about the description and giving credit," the architect notes. "It takes about five minutes, and in that amount of time, it will get repinned two or three times. I don't get that level of engagement on Facebook."

Pinterest skews heavily toward female consumers, the group that studies show make most home renovation decisions. Pinterest could be a great tool for any dealer that sells kitchen and bath products, lighting, window treatments and outdoor living products, says Elton Mayfield, co-founder and partner of ER Marketing, a B2B marketing firm that specializes in building products.

"My wife uses Pinterest for what she'd like to do with the house," Mayfield says. "I redid our half bath because of a picture I saw of a color. That used to be hard to keep. This is easy. It's my dream book."—P.C.

### 140-Character Connections

One of the more notable uses of social media in the building materials industry is KB Tribe Chat, a weekly online discussion group on Twitter about the kitchen and bath industry. It's organized by Stacy Garcia, a California custom cabinetmaker who wanted a platform to be able to talk about her business and show off her knowledge.

The weekly chat always has a theme, such as color trends, universal design, lighting or solid surfaces; it typically draws 40 to 50 professionals.

Garcia posts a topic each week, inviting pros to follow the conversation

by using the hashtag #KBtribechat. (Hashtags—called that because they start with the # sign—make it easy for Twitter users to read comments on a common subject.) For designers who can't break away during the work day to join the chat, she publishes a transcript. Garcia either moderates the chat herself or lines up a guest to host the conversation. Mark Johnson, an architect, recently led a chat focusing on products used in design houses at the International Builders' Show; he had all the photos posted in Pinterest scrapbooks.

"Some interior designers say, 'You make me think so much. You really

pushed me,' which I like," she says. "I want there to be a reason why people showed up besides just saying hello. ... I try to be on topic if something's happening in our industry. Sometimes something will take legs and one of the bloggers will grab onto something and continue the discussion on their blog."

**Digest Information** Rob Bivens, a sales associate with Golden State Lumber in Petaluma, Calif., has found a way to make use of social media even though his contractor customers aren't active users. He uses Google alerts to stay on top of industry news and then tweets that information to his Twitter

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followers, who are mostly other people in the building industry across the country. Once a week, he compiles his tweets into a digest that he e-mails to about 400 contacts.

"I call it the Monday Morning News," Bivens says. "I send that to all my customers so they could read the news I found online. It's an efficient way to share information with my customers that they might not get in other places."

Connecting needn't be complicated. Years before LinkedIn or Facebook, John Fix created the elements of an online networking group with Hardlines Digest, an e-mail discussion board that now has 2,600 members. Fix, president of Cornell's True Value Hardware in Eastchester, N.Y., first printed the newsletter in the early 1990s and mailed a few issues before deciding to move it to an e-mail list.

"It's like a discussion forum" that goes to dealers, vendors, manufacturers and even insurance professionals, says

Fix, who studied computers in college and computerized his family's store in 1982. "It's basic e-mail; it rejects posts if people send photos or attachments. It keeps the list from getting spammed."

With 10 sponsors, Hardlines Digest pays for itself, Fix says. He keeps it running because he takes satisfaction in sharing knowledge with other dealers.

"It's a way to teach them something and share some ideas," he says. "We used to get together at the markets and have roundtables and user groups. Someone said, 'We should have this every day.' It's kind of like a daily user group."

Fix kept the list on his own e-mail server instead of moving it to a Google or LinkedIn group because it's "100% in my control. I don't have to worry if Google groups changes the rules."

For Linsky, there's no question that social media is where his company needs to be. National Lumber is on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, he

says, for the same reason it hosts training sessions for remodelers: To help its customers grow their businesses.

"We understand what it's like to be a remodeler," he says. "There's a world of training needs. The people we're doing business with don't have the time to go through that stuff, but I do. I know they appreciate it."

As soon as he learns something valuable about products, design trends, code changes or other industry-related topics, he passes it along to his sales managers to share with National's pro customers. That way, the sales team is viewed as the go-to source for the latest information in the business.

"It puts us on the cutting edge," he says. "You're staying in front of your good customers, letting them know you have some expertise. ... The customers know that we know what we're talking about or at least that we can find the answers. We want to be known as the expert in the field." ■

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